

## ENCAGEMENT IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S INFINITE JEST

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### ABSTRACT

*David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest" is a literary tome that exemplifies the maximalist novel in its numerous interlinking storylines and excruciating attention to detail. Analyzing the novels' major themes and concepts, this article tries to isolate and evaluate the specific problem which Wallace refers to as "Encagement" of the Self. It enlarges the scope of the definition of "Encagement" from solipsism or narcissistic obsession and explores its relationship with the will and its symbolic contribution towards linking the narrative. The modern-day relevance of this question and the short-sighted response of post-modernism is criticized by David Wallace in this novel. Instances from the work are cited to demonstrate the shortcomings of irony and the negative freedom it accords to the characters when adopted as an attitude and philosophy of life. In its place, Wallace proposes a culture of New Sincerity that emphasizes the need for sentiment and authentic expression.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Infinite Jest, David Foster Wallace, Will, Irony, Post-Modernism, New Sincerity*

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### INTRODUCTION

In an article in New York Times, David Foster Wallace likens watching excellent sportsmen like Roger Federer on T.V. to a religious experience. Beauty is not the goal of competitive sports, but high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty. The level of skill and athleticism seen in these tournaments is, in itself, godlike. Which is one of the reasons why these sports generate a cult-like following and fevered excitement within their audience. Contemporary gods are perfectly human. As DFW describes in his article, you can find out basically anything about Federer's life. Where he went to school, what his parents were like, what motivated him to be such a grand success? Etc. Our gods are more accessible than ever before in human history. They are, of course gifted, but their position at the top is separated from their peers only by a few inches. This difference, though small, is very important and needs to be preserved by an almost impossible effort of the human will. Brilliant as such an expression of human will is, it can just as easily be destructive. Infinite Jest is a gargantuan tragic comedy about contemporary America. Its use of irony, *recherché* modernism, lack of structure and endnotes make it so unconventional in form as to be almost experimental.

"The greatest danger that of losing oneself, can pass off in the world as quietly as if nothing at all had happened.(Robinson, 2012)"As we see in the case of Don Gately, if he had not dropped a year, if things had been different, he might have ended up with an illustrious sports career in contrast to the life of petty thefts, drugs and rehab he ended up with. The human will then, is not a creative force or an intelligent entity, it is something to be overcome. The tennis player is taught to forget the world outside and live within the rigid spectrum of rules that the Tennis Academy has constructed. Similarly, with the rehab inmates and the general populace. If left to their own animal instincts, humans have a tendency towards self-destruction, in the pursuit of pleasure, often disguised as

happiness.

The pursuit of happiness, a subject of ironic humor in the novel is seen as the greatest fraud of the modern century. In a general and political vein, it signifies the rise of American consumerism and its efforts to recast the globe into one Disney McWorld. In a more philosophical approach, it questions the need for this quest for gratification. Its moral and social implications aside, Wallace questions whether the pursuit of this mythical happiness has a discernible endpoint. Since Wallace was unhappy with the answers that irony, the supreme value of postmodernism, seemed to provide he uses the same device to treat not only postmodern elements like pastiche and but also its opposite, gooey sentiment, or authenticity.

This paper examines the central antagonist of the novel as the self itself and its unique dilemma which Wallace calls “encagement”. The paper then goes on to evaluate Wallace’s compatibilist approach to the will. It also shows Wallace’s critique of postmodern irony in providing a meaningful way to transcend this dilemma.

Much like a David Salle painting, the novel is fragmented and multilayered. One of the themes that flows through all the diverse storylines is the loneliness of being. There is Hal’s inability to truly communicate his feelings to his mother, Don Gately and the other drug addicts whose primary purpose is to establish an empathetic gateway out of their problems as well as the isolation inherent in the American ideal of individuality. The problem begins with the onset of the teenagers “spiritual puberty” (Wallace, 1997). For the first time in his life, he has been introduced to the concept of loneliness. “Once we’ve hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young”. Loneliness can be imagined to be a logical response to an existential crisis, or a refuge from a confusing and threatening world, a painful but necessary withdrawal, but this is where things start to get twisted. Wallace represents loneliness as a way to connect as opposed to a way to preserve. The American Arts are the guide to inclusion where one learns how to wear loneliness as a mask, in the form of cynicism, nihilism and irony. It is not a choice that holds any substance in and of itself, but it does save one from being lampooned for “gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté” (Wallace, 2006, p. 694). A unique term that Wallace uses here is the “encagement of the self” (Wallace, 2006, p. 694). An existential fear of being unable to look past or communicate in any meaningful way the essence of one’s experiences. The teenager is afraid of being encaged in the self so he makes any effort he can to be accepted by his friends and family members. But loneliness itself is not enough to define “encagement”, it more than being alone or feeling as if one is alone. Encagement also introduces an element of hopelessness. If one spoke to someone at the gates of hell, and he told him about all the horrors and tribulations he had suffered there, it would still not be the same as having been to hell. Encagement is also similar to such a condition where one finds the self trapped in a condition, which although it can be seen by others, communicated to others by way of words, even depicted on a canvas, can never replace the actual experience. The deadly Entertainment also symbolizes a kind of encagement. Although one hears lengthy discussions about it, its effects on the viewer, its origins and speculations about its contents, the reader can never see the actual Infinite Jest.

Solipsism, the illusion of being the only mind in the universe, the unconscious generative impulse of everything you encounter or imagine, is depicted time and again as the loneliest of conditions (Hayes-Brady, 2017). The paradox which emerges within the characters is the need to fill the void within themselves as well as to escape it.

Certain characters try to fill this emotional gap with constructive things. They revel in their solipsistic existence to the extent that they believe they can control this inner world. The consciousness of one’s own self demands enquiry, otherwise like Hal one ends up feeling hollow or empty. Kierkegaard’s idea of the self and individuality can be useful here.

In Kierkegaard individuality “assumes alarming proportions where the individual is the suffering python of choice that swallows up all concept of the co-operative or the corporate” (Glass, 1987). According to him, discovering one’s purpose in life is a moral imperative. Without it, we lose ourselves to lower drives like pleasure, desire, or distractions. Great significance is attached to individual choice and commitment. In *Either/Or* he writes:

“Here, then, I have your view of life, and, believe me, much of your life will become clear to you if you will consider it along with me as thought-despair. You are a hater of activity in life—quite appropriately, because if there is to be meaning in it, life must have continuity, and this your life does not have. You keep busy with your studies, to be sure; you are even diligent; but it is only for your sake, and it is done with as little teleology as possible. Moreover, you are unoccupied; like the laborers in the Gospel standing idle in the marketplace, you stick your hands in your pocket and contemplate life. Now you rest in despair. Nothing concerns you; you step aside for nothing; “If someone threw a roof tile down I would still not step aside.” You are like a dying person. You die daily, not in the profound, earnest sense in which one usually understands these words, but life has lost its reality and you “Always count the days of your life from one termination-notice to the next.” You let everything pass you by; nothing makes any impact. But then something suddenly comes along that grips you, an idea, a situation, a young girl’s smile, and now you are “involved,” for just on certain occasions you are not “involved,” so at other times you are “at your service” in every way. Wherever there is something going on you join in. You behave in life as you usually do in a crowd. “You work yourself into the tightest group, see to it, if possible, to get yourself shoved up over the others so that you come to be above them, and as soon as you are up there you make yourself as comfortable as possible, and in this way you let yourself be carried through life.” But when the crowd is gone, when the event is over, you again stand on the street corner and look at the world.”—*Either/Or* Part II p. 195–196

Wallace makes a similar point regarding suicides in highly successful people at the top of their fields. Once you reach the goal, you realize that it isn’t all that you thought it would be. It doesn’t complete you or add meaning to your life as you had thought it would. Since you are being carried through life, you rarely if ever stop to think about the meaning of your life and quickly become disillusioned with success, perfection, and happiness when it fails to provide you with that meaning.

In the novel, such an enquiry or self-reflection often leads to alienation, addiction, and isolation. Even though Hal has a perfectly understanding mother with whom he knows he can share anything, he hides his drug addiction from her. On the other hand, it is only through obedience to a higher ideal, through community or at least the illusion of it, that one can transcend the self. The students in the Tennis Academy are all deeply alone and isolated from each other as they are each other’s competition. However, the Enfield Tennis Academy makes the training so hard, the curriculum and academics so stressful, that the students now have a common enemy that they can hate together. They bond over their anger at the system and thus develop a feeling of being “together”.

Another example can be seen by drawing parallels, although rather crude, between Quidam in Søren Kierkegaard’s *Stages on Life’s Way* and the drug addicts of *Infinite Jest*. Quidam (Someone) cuts himself off from the world and his beloved to save them from his depression. Although he wants her with all his heart, he refuses to “weaken and destroy (her) by initiating her into his sufferings”. He recognizes the darkness of the human spirit and the futility of relationships and so tries to save them both. He withdraws into himself and chooses the monastery over the world. He aspires to be an unhappy lover. He wishes that his love remain unfulfilled. Just like the addict, despite loving the drug,

wishes desperately never to go back to it. The Ennet House Rehab Centre is a kind of monastery in that way, because it allows the Residents to cut themselves off from the world:

“You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like this until you start to believe it, just like if you ask somebody with serious sober time how long you'll have to keep schlepping to all these goddamn meetings he'll smile that infuriating smile and tell you just until you start to want to go to all these goddamn meetings. There are some definite cultish, brainwashy elements to the AA Program.”

Like Quidam, the residents also have a psychological dispensation, an inner reason, or a secret truth that drives them to drugs in the first place.

Thus, the realization of encagement also brings with it the need to escape or transcend it. One cannot avoid ambivalence by an act of the will. As Schopenhauer put it “Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills.” The process of recovery becomes automatic when it is subservient to a Higher Power. The impulses that drive the addict cannot be overcome because they are a product of his own will. He can't will himself to do something he doesn't want. No matter how noble the thought, or how necessary or important the reason, his desires are mere impulses. They are not enough for him to make a rational decision. So, the most important part of the recovery process becomes the making of the decision or The First Step. Coming In is the most important step in this process as it means “admitting that your personal ass is kicked”.

Once the addict has surrendered his will, the group reinforces his decision to stay away from the Substance. Enforced through repetition, it is like dialysis for his will. It performs a function his organs have failed to perform.

The reason such a process becomes necessary relates to the genesis of the idea of death by pleasure. The original experiment of Rat Park, discussed in the novel as well, was “a study that showed that rats when given a rich, fulfilling environment tended to avoid readily-available, opiate-laced water, but when faced with a stark and denuded cage, the rats found themselves hopelessly hooked on the same opiates. (Mike Broida, 2016)” A character's cage could be poverty, unhealthy relationships or the lack of passion in one's life.

Some of this translates to destructive human behavior like addiction to drugs and alcohol. Several reasons can be behind this kind of behavior; one may minimize the actual risk associated with this habit, hold an excessively solipsistic worldview, or rationalize one's unhealthy habits. Don Gately also seems to rationalize his habit when during his heist years “he let Fackelmann fix them both up but good and told himself he was doing it to keep Fackelmann company, like sitting up with a sick friend, and (maybe worst) believed it was true.

(Wallace, 2006, p. 933)” Some people are willing to use even illogical and strained arguments to justify their actions like “one drink won't hurt him if he puts it in a glass of milk.”

Thus, the will can be seen as both a constructive and a destructive force. It presents a paradox, in as far as there is a dissonance between the characters and their perceptions of themselves. There is a dissociation of the self into two, particularly emphasized in Wallace's work as alienation, encagement and the struggle against human limitations. “One after another his characters parade through the novel revealing selves that are broken, diminished, only partially there, hiding in alienation from themselves and others, and, in their addictive distractions, lacking the freedom to become whole. Deadened in the gravity of their duality, they are caged beings, “dead men walking” from one wall to another and back again. (Plank, 2021)”

The reasons for engagement as we have seen, may relate to a diseased will that engages in self-destructive behaviors, employing any and every means to continue on this path but which arises in the first place from a lack of emotional, spiritual fulfilment or a denuded cage. Ultimately Wallace admits that “a drug addict was at root a craven and pathetic creature: a thing that basically hides. (Wallace, 2006, p. 932)” Here we can also find the beginning of Wallace’s critique of certain uses of irony. *Infinite Jest* epitomizes new sincerity, where it tries to take away the insulating capacity of irony and reveal its true nature as an empty theory incapable of subsisting without the very thing it critiques.

In *Infinite Jest* Wallace critiques the “hip cynical transcendence of sentiment (Wallace, 2006, p. 694)” through irony and cynicism as seen in postmodern thought permeating millennial culture. Postmodernism itself was a reaction to the modernist movement predicated on an optimistic view of the future and believing in a single truth that will explain everything. Instead, according to postmodernism “truth is found in context and individuality. Other qualities that have defined the movement are moral relativism, and especially irony and cynicism. (Solway, 2016)” The use of such methods as popular methods to transcend engagement is presented as just another way to complicate and reinforce the double bind the characters are already facing. As postmodernism’s obsession with irony threatens to take over everything, reality seems to fray at the edges. In fact, it seems, it ceases to matter at all. Like the infamous tape that kills the person who watches it, reality peels away, in the face of gratification:

“Irony is a qualification of subjectivity. In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in which the given actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him. But this very freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities. (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 262)”

Wallace here refers to irony as a philosophy and an outlook rather than a literary device, which he himself employs several times throughout the novel.

The arts which popularize this hip ennui fail to engage their audience and leave them engaged within the self:

“Wallace contends that serious fiction needs to counter television's implicit denial "that we're lonely" and that its images (and the Internet's as well) contribute to loneliness by providing only the "facsimile of a relationship without the work of a relationship" (136). Fiction's job, then, is to "aggravate"-even antagonize-a "sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny" (136) (Miller 5).”

For Wallace, literature presents more than just an argument or a set of ideas, it is meant to be a conversation in which a relationship is forged which can help the reader feel transcend the boundaries of his intellectual, emotional as well as spiritual self.

Employing irony to face real life challenges and to answer deep existential questions, emphasizes for the passive reader, the true extent of the character’s entrapment and presents a comical albeit sad effect. Two bodies of evidence can be cited in this regard. The first is Joelle and the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. This is the most visible instance of the use of Kierkegaardian negative freedom. The identity is derived from the act of hiding. Thus, value is being derived from a negative here:

"You crave connection and society, you know intellectually that you're no less worthy of connection and society than anyone else simply because of how you appear, you know that hiding yourself

away out of fear of gazes is really giving in to a shame that is not required and that will

keep you from the kind of life you deserve as much as the next girl.... You're supposed to be strong enough to exert some control over how much you want to hide, and you're so desperate to feel some kind of control that you settle for the appearance of control. (Wallace, 2006, p. 535)"

Joelle tells Gately that she is so beautiful that if someone were to see her, they would lose their minds. She tries to sell the notion that she is so beautiful she's deformed. However, we find later that her face is deformed by acid. Here, even though it might appear to Joelle that she is gaining control of the situation, by hiding even her need to hide, she has only reached the bars within "The ultimate annular fusion: that of exhibit and its cage."

Then, there is Marathe and his choice of loving a woman who is disabled and catatonic. His choice of loving this woman, although it fills him with a sense of purpose and informs his sense of self as being devoted to something larger than himself does not preclude the fact that this decision was not based on any actual romance between the two. It is simply that Marathe, in his desperation and suicidal state, has found a cause that would let him engage in self-destructive behavior without feeling like a coward. Love between them had never existed. What was there was a gap which needed to be filled. If one decides to fill it with a board that says, 'Huge Sinkhole', then it can hardly be called meaningful.

Wallace mistrusts the use of irony both for its lack of meaning and because of the distance it creates between the artist and its audience. As Wallace points out in an AA speaker

"[he] is dreadfully, transparently unfunny: painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse and impress them. The guy's got the sort of professional background where he's used to trying to impress gatherings of persons. He's dying to be liked up there. He's performing. The White Flag crowd can see all this. Even the true morons among them see right through the guy. This is not a regular audience... Speakers who are accustomed to figuring out what an audience wants to hear and then supplying it find out quickly that this audience does not want to be supplied with what someone else thinks it wants. (Wallace, 2006, p. 367-368)"

Instead, what is needed is a culture of sincerity. To make a real connection, it is important to address the things which are "Really Real", without humor or irony. One's actions should be relieved of their performative nature while still retaining their conviction. It might be hard and uncomfortable to make this change, but it is the only hope if one wants to escape the engagement of the self.

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